

GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

FOREST FIRE OF 1867

Eye-witness accounts of the great
fire that devastated some 200,000
acres of Gaspesia in 1867, the
Year of Confederation.

KEN ANNETT

FOREST FIRE OF 1867FOREWORD

Major forest fires have been a recurring phenomenon of life in Gaspesia over generations. GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY recalled one such early fire in article #003, THE ADVENTURES OF DR. VON IFFLAND, in this extract:

"At the beginning of June when it was very warm and the air dry, some persons set fire imprudently in various woodlots so as to clear land and the most terrible consequences followed. Fire consumed the woods for a league and a half and burned down five houses; indeed the fire was so violent that it menaced the woods of all the land bordering Gaspé Bay. The Protestant church was burned to the ground four hours after the congregation (Anglican) had met in it for service and had it not been for the efforts of the populace a vessel in the shipyard would have suffered the same fate. The whole sky seemed to be on fire and many believed that the fire would spread much further. Happily rain fell the next day and continued to fall for a week."

Some six years earlier, in 1825, the whole of the Chaleur Bay area had felt the effects of the GREAT MIRAMICHI FIRE, so vividly described by Robert Cooney in the GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY article #102, from his COMPENDIOUS HISTORY OF THE NORTHERN PART OF THE PROVINCE OF NEW BRUNSWICK AND OF THE DISTRICT OF GASPÉ.

Though the following account of the great fire of 1867 is of a much later date it shares the common theme of the helplessness of man in the face of natural disaster.

FOREST FIRE OF 1867

The JOURNAL OF THE QUEBEC LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY in its Appendix No.2 for 1869 has testimony of witnesses called before a Committee of the Assembly to investigate major forest fires in the Province. The following is a free translation of the testimony of Joseph Ignace Létourneau of the Parish of Ste.Anne des Monts, farmer and fishery guardian.

"I live in the Parish of Ste.Anne des Monts, near the Church, but I have a lot of land in the 1st Range in the western part of the Parish. In the month of July of the year 1867, not being sure of the exact day, the crops having long been sown and the hay already quite high, a person pulling out stumps and clearing land in the 2nd Range of the Parish lit a fire to burn piles of brush and branches on the said lot.

This fire, fanned by a light breeze and fueled by dry stumps and brush soon spread to the turf that had been dried out by the summer sun.

Before proceeding I should point out that for a month or more our district had experienced a very dry spell. This fire, having soon assumed the proportions of a forest fire, spread on the same day to neighbouring lots burning fences, standing grain and hay in its course, and leaving behind only ashes havoc and desolation.

At almost the same time a farmer of the 2nd Range of the same parish, near the place called "Echourie", also set fire to brush on his lot. This fire spread to neighbouring lots and to the forest of the region. I know from a reliable source that all of the forest extending to the River Lapierre, eleven leagues to the East and as far as Méchins, nine leagues to the West, and back to the 3rd Range was mostly all consumed by this forest fire which was only put out by the rains and snows of autumn.

Now I must add that a third fire started up about the same time in Cap Chatte Parish, spread to the neighbouring woods and soon joined up with the other fires to devastate the forest.

TESTIMONY OF JOSEPH IGNACE LETOURNEAU CONTINUED

"This latter fire burnt homes, barns, fences, and standing grain in Cap Chat Parish. In the township where I live, in Ste. Anne Parish, more than a third of the standing grain was destroyed by the fire I spoke of previously.

The damage caused by these fires both to the cleared lands and to the forests is incalculable. It will take at least fifty years to repair this damage.

The forests about Ste. Anne des Monts and Cap Chat are very good - composed mainly of hardwood, especially of maple, and of very good quality. I must say it is my opinion that during the summer months from the 20th of June to the 15th of September, or thereabouts, no fires should be lit on new lots either for clearing the land or any other purpose. The fires that have devastated our forests have always been started by persons who set fire to brush and branches in clearing land. It is such fires that spread to the forests.

And the witness has signed, 24th March 1869

(Signed) Jos. Ignace Létourneau.

I am aware of the facts stated above and find them stated with exactness. I concur in the opinions expressed.

(Signed) Joseph Thibault,

Teacher. Ste. Anne des Monts, Gaspé.

24th March, 1869

THE TESTIMONY OF CHARLES F.ROY, ESQ.,MEMBER OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF QUEBEC, LIVING AT STE.ANNE DES MONTS IN THE COUNTY OF GASPE.

I would say at the outset, as a general thesis, that the relentlessness of land clearing in all parts of the Province in our time is such as to arouse serious concern for all those interested in our country's future.

Until now too few persons have been concerned with this question. This is not to say that it is unimportant. On the contrary the few concerned men who have already written on the subject have shown, with evidence, the disastrous consequences that will soon follow upon inconsiderate clearing of our lands if measures are not taken to put an end to the abuses which threaten our forests with complete destruction.

For my part I sincerely regret that so important a matter has not, before this, been the subject of special legislation.

Forest fires, exploitation of the forests and land clearing- these are the principal causes of the destruction of our forests; they are also the principal subjects that should be the object of this Committee's investigations.

Not only should forest fires be considered a serious nuisance to the lumber business, or again as great depreciation of the Public Domain, or solely in consideration of the future needs of the country but they must also be considered from the point of view of colonization.

I can state without hesitation that these fires are a serious obstacle to the progress of colonists and to the development of certain localities. It is the duty of legislators, businessmen and colonists to join forces in efforts to prevent them. To give some idea of the disaster caused by forest fires I will cite two instances known to me. I had the honour to advise the Honourable Commissioner of Crown Lands of one case in August 1867. Here is an extract of the letter that I sent to him at that time.

" A most disastrous forest fire has ravaged the coast of the County of Gaspé from L'Anse à la Croix in Cherbourg Township to River Lapierre in the Seigniory of Mont St. Louis, over a distance of 69 miles. I have just travelled over the burned localities and personally visited most of the colonists that suffered loss. More than 100 families are destitute and facing profound misery. The total of the losses, considering the means of those who have suffered them, is immense. A considerable number of the colonists lost everything - crops, farm buildings and their homes. More than 2,000 arpents of pasture and hay fields have been totally destroyed. Some two-thirds of all the fences in the path of the fire were completely destroyed; the forest itself over an area of more than 200,000 acres is entirely ruined. But of all the losses that which carries the most bitter consequences is the destruction of the 1,273 minots of grain sown - the colonists chief wealth and their only hope. I list below the names of the Townships ravages by the fire with the number of buildings and minots of grain burnt in each:

<u>TOWNSHIP</u>	<u>BUILDINGS</u>	<u>MINOTS GRAIN BURNT</u>
CHERBOURG	4	85
DALIBAIN	3	113
ROMIEU	11	258
CAP CHATTE	3	542
TOURNELLE	4	166
CHRISTIE	2	57
DUCHESNAY	1	52
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	28	1273

[NOTE - The French MINOT of seed grain is the equivalent of a PECK in English measure. KHA]

If we judge from the fine crop from the little seed grain that escaped from the fire the crops would have been very productive here this year. Even assuming that the return would not exceed the average of the past five years, that is to say a little more than ten minots for each minot sown, the actual loss of the colonists would not be less than a

" 12,000 to 13,000 minots of all grain, an immense loss, as I said above, and made more considerable when the destruction of such a quantity of grain is accompanied by that of fodder, always in short supply here, which this year will lead to the killing off of most of the cattle.

The effects of this sad calamity, of which so many colonists are the victims today, will most likely be felt here for a longtime.

Secondly I would draw attention to the state of devastation now to be found in a part of the Matapedia valley.

Last October I was especially charged by the Honourable Commissioner of Crown Lands to examine a part of that valley so important as the route of the Intercolonial railway and for the richness of its soil.

I do not exaggerate when I say that in the part of the Matapedia valley to the east of the lake and along the river that bears the same name an area of more than 1000 square miles of forest is totally devastated; this devastation happened some years ago as the height of the various species that are growing up to replace the mature forest of former years has already attained an average height of 7-8 feet. It would be difficult to estimate the immense quantity of fine timber of all kinds that was destroyed in this region. In the rare spots that escaped the fire, pine, spruce, birch, maple and cedar are to be found in abundance. Everywhere the trees had been large. The average diameter of the immense number of tree trunks that today litter the ground is from 20 to 30 inches; I even noted a certain number of these burnt trunks of 30 to 40 inches in diameter.

Based on information that I gained on the spot I can state that the Matapedia Valley forests, formerly considered to be inexhaustible, have supplied a large quantity of first quality wood for foreign markets for many years. Needless to say this forest industry is no longer being exploited as the destruction of the forest was followed necessarily by the closing of the lumber camps; such suspension, apart from its commercial impact, has had the immediate effect of putting out of work most of the fishermen from the Bay Chaleur region who worked in these

" lumber camps during the winter season.

As to the means that I believe necessary to prevent such accidental forest fires I would submit the following three points:

1. Forbid those persons clearing land to set fire to wood or brush during the dry period of summer - let us say from June 20th to September 15th.
2. Prescribe, in the light of experience, how fires should be lit to prevent the spread to moss, brush, dry branches or other inflammable material by which the fire might spread. Require everyone lighting a fire to see that it is completely extinguished before leaving the site.
3. By the threat of severe penalty oblige those who frequent the forest to cease making fires for their pleasure as is too often the case now.

It is my opinion that Government should encourage reforestation; to accomplish that subsidies could be granted to those individuals who have most successfully reforested certain parts of their lots. Tree farms as a part of Normal Schools or Agricultural Schools could contribute to spreading the idea that forests are useful and valuable and that they require care. Such policies could produce a needed change in public opinion regarding the value of our forests.

I am completely in favour of a system of reserves that the Government could set aside for certain forested areas by grants to individuals or companies. It is recognized that many areas are not suited for agriculture - to strip off the trees renders such lands useless. It would be preferable to leave them wooded and harvest forest products from them selectively.

April 2nd., 1869

(Signed) C.F.Roy, M.P.P.

